
How to Write a Scholarly Book Review for Publication in a Peer-Reviewed Journal

A Review of the Literature

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Purpose: To describe and discuss the processes used to write scholarly book reviews for publication in peer-reviewed journals and to provide a recommended strategy and book appraisal worksheet to use when conducting book reviews. **Methods:** A literature search of MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, and the Index to Chiropractic Literature was conducted in June 2009 using a combination of controlled vocabulary and truncated text words to capture articles relevant to writing scholarly book reviews for publication in peer-reviewed journals. **Results:** The initial search identified 839 citations. Following the removal of duplicates and the application of selection criteria, a total of 78 articles were included in this review including narrative commentaries ($n = 26$), editorials or journal announcements ($n = 25$), original research ($n = 18$), and journal correspondence pieces ($n = 9$). **Discussion:** Recommendations for planning and writing an objective and quality book review are presented based on the evidence gleaned from the articles reviewed and from the authors' experiences. A worksheet for conducting a book review is provided. **Conclusions:** The scholarly book review serves many purposes and has the potential to be an influential literary form. The process of publishing a successful scholarly book review requires the reviewer to appreciate the book review publication process and to be aware of the skills and strategies involved in writing a successful review. (J Chiropr Educ 2010;24(1):57-69)

Key Indexing Terms: Authorship; Book Reviews; Book Reviews as Topic; Manuscripts as Topic; Publishing; Writing

INTRODUCTION

In the current publishing market, there is no shortage of books written for the busy health care practitioner or academic professional.¹ The scholarly book reviewer plays an important role in informing readers about new books and guiding their reading preferences as they explore the Internet and large catalogues provided by publishers. With the expectations of the many stakeholders in the book review process (readers, authors, journal editors, and publishers) mounted on the reviewer's shoulders, the production of a well balanced, engaging, and informative critique, within the confines of a

predetermined word limit, is no simple task. Some book review editors describe book reviewing as a fine art.²

The scholarly book review is considered by some to be a form of academic writing that serves to describe and critically evaluate the content, quality, meaning, and significance of a book.³⁻⁶ A well constructed book review can provide a thoughtful perspective and will be appreciated by all; however, "...a bad review blows up in your face, not just in the author's."⁷ Many problems identified in poorly conducted book reviews can be attributed to the poor evaluative and writing skills of the reviewer.⁸ However, sometimes these problems are rooted in the book reviewer's lack of understanding of portions of the book review process.⁷ An appreciation of the purpose and significance of all aspects of the book review process can provide the book

review author with a wider perspective to employ when crafting a book review.

In the biomedical literature, there are a number of expert opinion pieces that describe strategies for evaluating books and writing book reviews.^{2,5,6,9–14} However, we were unable to find an evidence-based source to assist authors when writing a book review. Thus, we conducted a structured literature search and narrative review of the literature to equip the book reviewer with an evidence-based understanding of all aspects pertaining to the book review process. This article provides an amalgamation of recommendations and a helpful worksheet to use when conducting book reviews.

METHODS

A literature search was conducted in June 2009 using the following databases: MEDLINE (1950–

2009) and EMBASE (1980–2009) through OVID Publishing, CINAHL Plus with Full Text (1937–2009) through EBSCO Publishing, and the Index to Chiropractic Literature (2000–2009). The search strategy used a combination of controlled vocabulary from the respective databases and truncated text words. All terms from the controlled vocabularies were exploded and searched as major concepts when available. Reference lists of the retrieved studies were scanned to identify any articles that may have been missed from the literature search. A full search strategy is provided in Figure 1.

Articles retrieved from the search were screened using abstracts and citations. In instances in which the article topic was unclear, the full text was retrieved. Article screening and selection was conducted by the primary author (ADL). Selection criteria for articles to be included in the review were that they must have been published in a peer-reviewed journal and reported on one or more of the

<p>OVID MEDLINE ("Book Reviews as Topic"[MeSH] OR "book review\$") AND ("Textbooks as Topic"[MeSH] OR "textbook\$" OR "Writing" [MeSH] OR "writing\$" OR "Authorship" [MeSH] OR "authorship\$" OR "Manuscripts, Medical" [MeSH] OR "Manuscripts as Topic" [MeSH] OR "manuscript\$" OR "Peer Review" [MeSH] OR "peer review\$" OR "Literature"[MeSH] OR "Medicine in Literature" [MeSH] OR "literature\$" OR "Publishing" [MeSH] OR "publish\$" OR "Editorial Policies" [MeSH] OR "Editorial"[MeSH] OR "editorial\$" OR "Periodicals as Topic" [MeSH] OR "periodical\$" OR "Publications" [MeSH] OR "publication\$")</p> <p>OVID EMBASE ("book review\$.mp") AND ("textbook\$.mp" OR "Peer Review/exp" OR "peer review\$.mp" OR "Writing/exp" OR "writing\$.mp" OR "Editorial/" OR "Medical Literature/exp" OR "Literature/exp" OR "Scientific Literature/exp" OR "Nursing Literature/exp" OR "literature\$.mp" OR "Publication/exp" OR "periodical\$.mp" OR "authorship\$.mp" OR "manuscript\$.mp" OR "Publishing/exp" OR "Publication/exp" OR "publish\$.mp" OR "book/exp" OR "book\$.mp")</p> <p>EBSCO CINAHL Plus with Full Text [(MM "Book Reviews") OR (book review*)] AND [(authorship*) OR (MM "Manuscripts") OR (MM "Edit and Review+") OR (manuscript*) OR (MM "Publishing+") OR (publish*) OR (publication*) OR (MM "Peer Review+") OR ("peer review") OR (writing) OR (MH "Writing for Publication") OR ("writing for publication") OR (MM "Edit and Review+") OR ("edit and review") OR (MM "Editors+") OR (editorial*) OR (MH "Education, Diagnostic Medical Sonography") OR (MH "Education, Emergency Medical Services") OR (MH "Education, Medical") OR (MH "Education, Medical Laboratory Technology") OR (MH "Education, Medical, Continuing") OR ("medical education") OR (MM "Allied Health Literature") OR ("allied health literature") OR (MH "Nursing Literature") OR ("nursing literature*") OR (MH "Medical Literature") OR ("medical literature") OR (MM "Chiropractic+")]</p> <p>Index To Chiropractic Literature ("book review" OR "book reviews") AND ("authorship*" OR "manuscript*" OR "publish*" OR "publication*" OR "peer review" OR "peer review process" OR "peer reviewers" OR "writing*" OR "write*" OR "editorial*" OR "editor*" OR "literature*" OR "education*" OR "periodical*")</p>

Figure 1. The search strategies used to obtain articles for this report.

following criteria: strategies for conducting scholarly book reviews, thematic issues related to the publication of scholarly book reviews, or recommendations on academic writing of which a section pertained to writing scholarly book reviews.

Articles that met the inclusion criteria were descriptively analyzed by the primary author (ADL) and the data extracted included: author(s), publication type, and narrative information concerning scholarly book reviews and their publication. To generate recommendations for conducting book reviews, the authors' personal experiences writing book reviews and acting as journal editors were used to supplement the evidence gleaned from the articles included in this review.

RESULTS

The initial search yielded 839 citations. After duplicate citations were removed and selection criteria were applied, a total of 76 articles were identified as being relevant for this report. Scanning of reference lists within each article yielded an additional 10 articles. Despite efforts made to contact the sources of eight publications, these articles were irretrievable due to lost holdings from accessed libraries and cessation of journal publication. Therefore, a total of 78 articles¹⁻⁷⁸ were included in this review. The articles included were classified into four groups according to their publication formats: 1) narrative commentaries ($n = 26$),^{2,4-7,9-14,47-61} 2) editorials or journal announcements ($n = 25$),^{1,3,15-37} 3) original research ($n = 18$),^{8,62-78} and 4) journal correspondence ($n = 9$).³⁸⁻⁴⁶

DISCUSSION

Stakeholders and Purpose of the Book Review

The scholarly book review serves many purposes and is best appreciated by understanding the perspectives of the stakeholders involved. The primary audience for a book review is the journal's readership. Book reviews are an excellent vehicle to inform readers about new books in the marketplace.^{27,52} Books are relatively expensive and scholars have limited time to commit to reading. Thus, journal patrons may rely upon the book review's evaluative purpose to guide their reading preferences.^{11,14}

Readers need to be informed of new, innovative, and ground-breaking books while being warned of books of poor quality and those that may not relate to their area of interest.² The book review can also increase a reader's scope by introducing books that a reader may not otherwise consider reading.^{2,14}

Interestingly, the authors of the books under review may be the most avid readers of book reviews.^{10,18} Authors have invested much time and effort into writing their books, and it is not surprising that an author would be curious about how other scholars perceive their books. The reviewer has the opportunity to provide the author with the recognition or appreciation they deserve or to provide suggestions for any faults identified in the final product.^{23,43} Therefore, the book review can play a large role in influencing the development of future editions.¹⁸

Publishers have a vested interest in book reviews because they are an indirect form of advertising and have the potential to influence book sales.²³ While this review did not identify a study that has evaluated the effect of book reviews on book sales, publishers continue to send review copies of their books to journal editors with the prospect of obtaining a book review.⁵⁰ In 1983, Morton⁶⁴ obtained survey data from 15 publishers. All publishers surveyed believed book reviews had a positive effect on sales to physicians, and each of the publishers in this study distributed review copies to medical journals in the hopes of having a review appear in one or more of the prestigious journals. Publishers may use book reviews to determine if a book is worthy of a future edition, whether changes need to be made for a future edition, and whether the author is worthy of another book contract.^{10,58} The contents of a favorable review may be used in promotional materials and book reviews can be used for market research for the planning of future titles.^{10,32}

It has been suggested that librarians use book reviews in the selection process for acquiring library holdings.^{10,60,64,65,68,77} Chen⁶⁸ cited an average time lag of 10.43 months from book release to book review publication, and Morton⁶⁴ identified publication time lag and inadequate book review indexing as limiting factors for the use of book reviews as selection tools. Book reviews may have an indirect effect on library selection by the recommendations of patrons and faculty for book selection. In 1986, Martin⁶⁵ surveyed 136 medical acquisition librarians and found that book reviews ranked seventh on a list of 10 selection aids used for book selection by

medical librarians and concluded that reviews were often used in conjunction with other selection tools for book selection. Some experts have suggested that book reviews may serve more as aids against which librarians may check their holdings for titles missed or as a means for identifying very important or poor titles.^{68,74} Whether book reviews are used to determine library holdings is debatable; however, librarians read them and may serve as book reviewers themselves.⁷⁷

Lastly, the book review serves several purposes for the reviewers. Publishing a scholarly book review allows the reviewer to contribute to the professional literature by acting as an entrusted critic with the responsibility of informing the readership of seminal works and warning it of inaccurate scholarship.^{32,61} Publishing book reviews is also an exercise of self-education. Many reviewers welcome the opportunity to stay current by reading a newly released text and enjoy practicing their critical faculties.⁵⁰ Academic authorities have proposed that writing a book review may be an excellent first publication experience for the novice writer.^{4,5,12,14,19,30,31,59} For experienced book reviewers, however, it may be their altruistic commitment to scholarship and the honor of being asked to review a book that may motivate them.⁶¹

Book Review Publication Process

The book review process starts and is driven, to a large extent, by the publisher.^{10,32} When review copies of new books are available, publishers send review copies to the staff of relevant journals in hopes that the book will be reviewed. Due to the overwhelming number of books sent to journals, not all books received are reviewed. Often the selection of books reviewed is made in accordance to a journal's aim, scope, and readership.⁵⁷ Once a book is selected for review, the book review editor must match the book with a qualified reviewer.^{9,22}

Most book reviews appearing in print are commissioned—meaning that book reviewers are invited by the book review editor to conduct the review.^{11,22,36} Book reviewers are typically not paid for their work, but often get to keep the book once they have completed their review.^{19,25,30,52,59} Therefore, editors tend to rely on a core group of book reviewers with different areas of expertise who have agreed to act in this capacity. Occasionally, the editor will invite a notable expert in the field to review a book. The ideal book reviewer has been described by Johnson¹⁰ as someone who has

published himself or herself in the field of concern. It is important that the author is familiar and well read on the topic. Being a specialist or an authority in one's field is an asset, but may not be a necessity. A few editorials and narrative commentaries mention that it is often advantageous to have reviews written by nonexperts who represent the intended audience of the book under review.^{4,6,11,22} However, if the book is written for a specialist audience, sufficient knowledge is required to properly review the material.^{9,11,12,30}

Commissioned reviews are preferred by most editors because it is easier to ensure consistency with journal policy and safeguard from conflict of interest.^{11,22,36} If the majority of reviews are invited, how does one become a reviewer? Occasionally journals will advertise for book reviewers.^{6,10,12,26} The majority of experts on book reviewing recommend that interested potential book reviewers contact the book review editor of a journal to express their interest. This should be followed up by sending a curriculum vitae with a cover letter outlining one's area(s) of expertise and the area(s) in which one would like to serve as a reviewer.^{11,12,30} It may be wise to send a portfolio of previously published book reviews and scholarly articles.⁵⁸ Unsolicited reviews, while not common, may be accepted by some journals if they are well written.^{10,12,36,55} If one is interested in writing an unsolicited review, most authorities advocate contacting the editor(s) of the journal in question prior to writing a review.^{10,12,36}

Once an invitation has been extended by the journal editor, the reviewer must decide if he or she is an appropriate match for the book in question.¹⁰ Professional ethics require that reviewers decline an invitation if their objectivity is compromised or if they are not qualified to conduct the review.^{8,9} Reasons for declining the invitation may include instances when the reviewer has a personal relationship with the author,² is being published or is seeking to be published by the same publisher, is not representative of the intended audience, or will be unable to meet the deadline.^{9,58} Certain journal editors mention that it is easier to handle an initial refusal than to navigate the ramifications of the aforementioned issues.^{12,36} If the invitation is declined, it is common courtesy for the invited to suggest another potential reviewer and make arrangements to return the book if it is already in possession.^{2,12}

Accompanying the invitation to conduct the book review is a submission deadline that usually ranges

from 1 to a few months.^{4,14,19} Research on the time lag from book release to the publication of its review highlights the importance of conducting the review in a timely manner.^{64,65,68} Book review editors have suggested that if the review cannot be completed by the deadline, the book should be sent back to the publisher so it can be reviewed promptly by another qualified individual.^{4,12} Conducting a high-quality review within the allotted time frame will ensure subsequent invitations to conduct book reviews.^{11,14}

When the completed book review has been submitted, the editor reserves the right to edit or reject the review.²⁴ It should be noted that book reviews are edited but are not customarily peer reviewed.^{50,60} Since many journals are not published monthly, it may take up to a year or longer for the review to appear in print.⁵⁸ Once published, the journal will sometimes send a copy of the book review to the book publisher.

Appraising the Book

Reading a book for the purposes of generating an informative critique necessitates a planned appraisal strategy. As a first step, the reviewer should research the author's qualifications and previous contributions to the topic area to determine the author's authority.^{4,5,9,13} If it is obvious the author is not sufficiently qualified, it may be appropriate to comment on this in the review. Before reading the book in depth, one should briefly skim the book to orient oneself to the organization, layout, and visual appeal. Note the type of book one is reviewing because different methods may be used to review different works.^{2,12} For example, the strategy for reviewing a new edition of a textbook will require an evaluation of any changes made from previous editions, whereas the assessment of a compilation of conference proceedings may focus on the organization and ease of locating abstracts.²

The majority of articles included in this report highlight the importance of reading the preface and introduction of the book prior to reading its content.^{2,4-6,9,12,14,52} These sections state the author's intentions, aims, and purpose for writing the book. Most importantly, these two sections will define the intended readership. It is important to judge the book by its aims and objectives and evaluate it from the perspective of the intended readership.^{5,6,14,52} A key question to ask is whether the contents are appropriate for the readership

level.^{2,6,14,58} Book reviewers can error by judging a book by their own aims and objectives and by criticizing authors for something that was explained in the preface.^{6,7,11}

Another section of a book that warrants a book reviewer's attention is the table of contents. It provides the reviewer with information about the organization of the book, an overview of its contents, and the development of the topics to be discussed.^{2,5,12} This section can be used to determine if all relevant topics were included or if any key topics were overlooked.^{4,5}

Once oriented to the preface, introduction, and table of contents, the reviewer now has a setting and perspective to appraise the book. The book should be read carefully, taking notes while reading, as any praise, arguments, criticisms, or conclusions made in the review should be substantiated.^{5,52} The book should be evaluated on a variety of items such as accuracy, completeness, readability, and relevance.^{3,5,11} A book appraisal worksheet is provided in the appendix (also online at www.journalchiroed.com) and lists a variety of appraisal items to be evaluated when reading a book for review. It also functions as a notation sheet where a reviewer can make notes on any strengths or weaknesses, write comments, provide examples to support these remarks, and make suggestions for improvement. These notes will form the basis of the critique.

While it is important to assess the book on a variety of features, certain key questions should be considered. What makes the book unique?^{5,11,58,61} Is the book useful to the intended readership?^{5,10,58} Was the book successful in achieving its aims and objectives?^{5,10,12} How does the book compare to its competitors?^{5,6,10,19} What contribution does the book make to the field?^{7,8,47,58,61} The answers to these questions will help the reviewer describe the distinguishing features of the book and place it within its field. Considering that a book review is a personal account of a book, it is important to note one's personal reactions to the book.^{6,11}

A recurring question in articles that discussed book appraisal strategies was whether the entire book must be read in order to write the review. All articles that answered this question made reference to the respect that must be given to an author's hard work. It would be disrespectful to the author(s) to write a review without carefully reading the entire book.^{6,11,19,48,49} However, some articles noted exceptions. It may not be practical to read

certain books from cover to cover, such as medical dictionaries, encyclopedias, and large multivolume texts.^{6,52} In these instances, a method of sampling should be developed and these methods should be reported in the book review.⁵²

Writing the Book Review

Writing the review can be a challenge because there is a reluctance for journals to provide a prescriptive format for writing book reviews.^{3,5,18} Book review editors often prefer reviews that are informative, engaging, and constructively opinionated.^{6,11} Therefore, any attempt for a book review to be formatted to a strict preconceived style is "...stunting creativity and literary development."¹¹ Critics of structured book reviews argue that such reviews are informative but dull.^{23,28} Since each book is unique, reviews should be tailored to the uniqueness of the book under review and the writing style of the reviewer. Variety in book reviews helps maintain the reader's interest.

It should be noted that certain journals may have specific format requirements; for instance, the inclusion of the book's specifications (eg, author, publisher, ISBN, number of pages, etc.) and word limit. A reviewer should become familiar with the journal's book review policy before writing the review. Although most journals do not provide strict book review writing guidelines, most exhibit an underlying "house style."^{6,29} A perusal of book reviews appearing in the journal will orient the reviewer to the journal's informal house style. Word limits vary between journals and can be as short as 75 words to greater than 2000.^{6,57} Chen's⁶⁷ study of 3347 biomedical book reviews found most reviews to be over 265 words. Kroenke⁶² identified a mean limit of 373 words among 480 medical book reviews

and found that tangential information and reviewer opinions on the subject of the book increased the length of reviews. The majority of sources consulted in this review reported word limits ranging from 250 to 500 words with editors' preferences toward shorter reviews.^{5,6,10,20,24,57} Limited word counts necessitate a concise writing style. Methven⁴ recommended combining several ideas into a single sentence to achieve the goal of being succinct. Many book review editors believe the quality of a book review is rarely associated with its length.^{4,10,22,24,57}

While there is no prescriptive style when writing a review, many experts outline a common strategy utilized to convey their critique,³⁻⁵ which is summarized in Table 1. These recommendations are in line with Motta-Roth's⁷⁹ findings of four main rhetorical moves identified in scholarly book reviews. These four moves are: 1) introduce the book, 2) outline the book, 3) highlight parts of the book, and 4) provide a general evaluation of the book. These four moves were often associated with the start of a new paragraph.⁷⁹

The reviewer must now decide which appraisal items to comment on in the review. Kroenke⁶² surveyed 480 book reviews and found that the mean number of features commented on per review was 9.0 ± 2.7 . With most reviews spanning 250 to 500 words, it is not possible to include a critique of all appraisal items evaluated. The reviewer must decide which items are most important to mention to provide a balanced and informative critique. The book appraisal worksheet found in the appendix is designed to assist the reviewer in compiling all appraisal notes into a single, efficient format for ease of identification of items to be included in the review.

Depending on the specific book under review, certain appraisal items may deserve more mention than others. For instance, a student textbook with

Table 1. A recommended strategy for crafting a book review

Paragraph of the Review	Action Step
First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capture the reader's attention. • Outline the aims and scope.³⁻⁵
Main text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the central ideas of the book. • Explore key arguments of the review. • Discuss strengths and weaknesses of the book. • Highlight the book's uniqueness. • Note the book's contribution to the field.^{3,4}
Final	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance the book's achievements and weaknesses in order to support the final assessment.^{3-5,8}

an index of limited utility is an important finding; however, the same finding in a patient handbook may not deserve mention. Similarly, the importance of image quality differs for a radiology text compared to a medical dictionary. It is important to recognize that appraisal item selection is specific to the book under review. In addition to these book-specific items, many experts suggest that attempts should be made to place a book in a larger, broader context to allow judgment of the book against its competitors and to allow for the determination of the book's contribution to its field.^{3–5,8,19,61,62}

A final note regarding book review writing is on how to convey criticism. A book review is an evaluative critique.⁴ Readers are interested in the book reviewer's opinions and a reviewer should not be afraid to state opinions.⁴ Any factual mistakes, shortcomings, or weaknesses should be made known.⁶ However, reviewers should be respectful to the authors and write in a professional manner. Book reviewers are not anonymous and the rules of basic courtesy and libel law apply.^{25,31,32} Given that book authors are often readers of book reviews, any unwarranted criticism likely will be read by the book author.^{10,18} Hill¹⁴ and Boring⁴⁷ recommend using descriptive comments, and not conclusions, to describe problems identified in books to allow readers to arrive at their own conclusions. Any criticism should be substantiated with examples or a relevant explanation of the reasons for the criticism to avoid confusion about a reviewer's arguments.^{14,33} Criticism should also be constructive.^{10,18,33} The reviewer, where possible, should provide suggestions for improvement, because these suggestions may influence the crafting of a future edition. The book appraisal worksheet found in the appendix is designed to aid the reviewer in developing sound criticism by providing a template to document examples to be used to substantiate criticism and to provide suggestions for improvement to ensure constructive comments. Desirable and undesirable characteristics of book reviews are listed in Figure 2.

Issues Relating to Book Reviews

Three issues deserve special attention: conflicts of interest, reviewer bias, and time lag in publication of reviews. One issue that can affect the credibility of a book review is the influence of a conflict of interest, which exists in scholarly publication when an author, reviewer, or editor has financial

or personal relationships that inappropriately influence his or her actions.⁸⁰ Conflicts of interest can occur when a book under review is published by the same publisher who publishes the journal that prints the review,⁶³ a book is reviewed by a journal and one of the author(s) or editor(s) of the book is an employee of the journal,⁶³ the reviewer is a personal friend of the author,¹⁷ the reviewer is a competing researcher or author,¹⁷ or there is financial gain that influences the outcome of the review.¹⁷ Avoiding these conflicts when publishing book reviews can be difficult, especially in highly specialized fields of study, when the pool of qualified experts who contribute to scholarly activities is small. In these situations, the likelihood of book reviewers, book authors, publishers, and journal editors having preexisting relationships increases, potentially affecting one's objectivity. When these conflicts of interest exist, transparency and proper disclosure of conflicts of interest are essential.^{17,63}

In addition to conflicts of interest, reviewer bias can influence book reviews. Fairness, accuracy, and objectivity of a review remain a problematic issue in publishing book reviews.^{18,20} For instance, book reviewers known to be overly critical may more likely produce negative reviews, enthusiastic reviewers may not scrutinize a literary work properly, and advocates for one opinion in a polarized field of study may not fairly judge a book about competing viewpoints.¹⁸ Reviewer bias has the potential to provide an inaccurate representation of the book in question and may negatively influence a readership's perceived value of the book review process. To increase the objectivity of book reviewers, some authors suggest that journals should encourage printed communication between the reviewer and book author,¹⁸ multiple reviews of the same title should be conducted,⁴⁰ and book reviews should be subjected to peer review. While some journals have implemented the former two suggestions, peer review of book reviews has not been widely accepted.⁴⁰

As mentioned earlier, the time lag of book review publication is an important issue affecting book reviews. For most academic works, the first year after publication is the period of greatest sales. On average, a book's use declines most rapidly in the early years following publication.^{57,66} Part of the problem relating to the time lag of book review publication can be attributed to the publishers. Review copies of books are often not available early enough for people to review them in time to coincide

Desirable Characteristics

- Written in a professional and constructive manner^{10,18}
- Incisive pinpointing of the strengths and weaknesses of the book^{7,8,58}
- Comprehensive, yet succinct^{7,8,24,30}
- Provides a good critique of theory in the field and the place of the book within it^{8,54}
- Criticism is substantiated and constructive^{9,10,14,18,33}
- Goes beyond criticisms to draw conclusions of much broader importance^{8,61}
- Judgment of the book against its competitors^{2,14,52,58}
- Addresses the potential book readers' needs and uses of the book^{2,5,11-13,49}
- Indicates how the reviewer's views changed as a result of reading the text⁸
- Includes declaration of conflict of interest statement^{17,63}
- Follows journal's guide/house style/requirements^{6,29}

Undesirable Characteristics

- Poor writing style⁸
- Reviewer is inappropriate for the task or has minimal knowledge of the subject area^{7,8}
- Contains incorrect and/or insubstantial claims and references⁸
- A review of the book's content but no critique^{8,10}
- Fails to discuss the book's argument and worth^{6,8}
- Written in an unprofessional style attempting to show the superiority of the reviewer^{7,8}
- Merely a chapter by chapter summary^{2,9,10,54}
- Merely highlights errors in spelling and construction^{11,19,54}
- Extols the reviewer's own ideas or philosophy to the exclusion of the content of the book^{2,11,12,58}
- Uses overworked, nonoriginal, cliché statements^{20,23}
- Describes a book the author should have written rather than the one that was written^{7,8,58}
- Fails to tell the reader how the book fits into the larger body of literature on the subject^{7,8,58,61}

Figure 2. Desirable and undesirable characteristics of book reviews.

with a book's release date. Even if review copies were available, by the time the review is completed, has passed the editing process, and has sat in line for publication, most experts and publishers believe the review would appear in print after the book publication anyway.⁶⁴

Future of Book Reviews

The future of the book review is uncertain. Recently, a perceived lack of utility of the book review has contributed to a fall in popularity of the literary form. In the past, the book review may have served more purpose in informing librarians and readers of new books. Currently, in the age of the Internet, librarians and readers are targeted more readily by publishers directly.³² Also, book reviews do not rank high in the hierarchical scale of professional scholarship. Academic institutions often do not give their scholars credit for publishing book reviews.²³ From a journal's perspective, the book

review makes no contribution to the journal's impact factor.^{32,72} There is also an issue of journal space and limited page count. The publication of a few pages of book reviews implies the rejection or delay in publication of an original research paper, which negatively impacts journal content and timeliness to publication.³² Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that the publication of book reviews helps sell books, increase readership of journal contents, or generate subscriptions to journals.³²

While some authors highlight issues detracting from the popularity of the scholarly book review, reforms have been proposed to contribute to the evolution of this literary form. Book review editors have proposed the exploration of different book review formats: specifically, the rejoinder, multidisciplinary, special issue, and integrated formats.^{8,16,34,61}

Rejoinders are reviews where the reviewer and author are given the opportunity to discuss the book and its review in the same journal issue, increasing the objectivity of the reviewer and providing the

reader with a more balanced perspective of the book being evaluated.^{16,52} The multidisciplinary format requires a book be reviewed by multiple reviewers, each coming from a different discipline, allowing a book to be reviewed in a broader disciplinary context.¹⁶ While appearing periodically, the special issue format is used to review books that supplement the central theme of papers in a special journal issue and may allow for better evaluation of a book's contribution to its topic area.¹⁶ The integrated review is a format conducted as an essay commissioned on a specific theme, and imbedded within the essay are reviews of books related to the paper's thesis. By merging book reviews within a treatise of a select topic, reviewers have the opportunity to utilize comparative analysis to extend reader understanding of writings on a topic, while publishing a substantial scholarly paper.^{16,31} Readers of this format have the opportunity to be enlightened by the essay and will appreciate more the book's significance and contribution of each book to the specific theme under discussion.^{16,31,34,35} While these alternative formats may seem appealing, they must demonstrate their usefulness in the framework of the dilemmas that journal editors face, including limited page space, impact factor, reader interest, and a priority to referee peer review of original manuscripts.

Another influential factor affecting the future of book reviews is information technology, which will influence how book reviews will be published as well as what is reviewed. There have been calls for book reviews to be published on the Internet to allow for immediacy and ease of discussion.^{22,77} With online publication, competition for print space will lessen and reviews may be able to extend to larger word limits as well as expand to use "new" formats.⁵⁷ Also, journal editors are increasingly receiving various information technology media for review.^{3,31,44} Book review sections of journals are slowly expanding their sections to include reviews of information technology media such as DVD, video, and websites.^{3,22,31,44}

Limitations and Research Directives

A limitation of this review is that the majority of literature used to formulate this report was based largely on expert opinion found in narrative commentaries, editorials, and journal correspondence. Original research constituted 23% of the articles included in this review; however, only

three of the studies^{8,72,77} were published within the past 5 years.

To improve the scholarly rigor in the book review literature, future efforts could investigate the validity of using expert opinion as a means for conducting book reviews, and formal studies could assess the impact of book reviews on book sales and journal subscriptions. Readership surveys could be conducted to assess reader interest in new book review formats and publishing venues, and more importantly, examine the impact of review formats on reader usage of information in their professional work. An exploration of these issues will contribute to the development of our understanding of writing and publishing scholarly book reviews.

CONCLUSION

The scholarly book review serves many purposes and has the potential to be an influential literary form. It can help guide a readership's reading practices, provide authors with constructive feedback, and help publishers plan and develop future books. However, due to the expectations of these same stakeholders, it is a challenging literary form to master. A reviewer must be aware of not just the strategies employed to conduct a review, but should be knowledgeable of the many issues affecting the entire book review process. An appreciation of this literary form in a broader context will allow the altruistic reviewer to publish a review more likely to be perceived as a valuable contribution to the literature.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The second author of this article is also the Editor-in-Chief of *The Journal of Chiropractic Education*. To mitigate conflicts of interest, this paper was refereed by a guest editor, Dr. Robert Ward. The paper was reviewed by blinded peer reviewers and Dr. Robert Ward is the sole person responsible for decisions regarding the disposition of this manuscript and the only person who knows the identities of the reviewers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors appreciate the assistance of Anne Taylor-Vaisey, MLS, with the literature searches.

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Appendix: Book Appraisal Worksheet (Available as a free download in Microsoft Word from www.journalchiroed.com)

Book Specifics

Title	
Author(s)/Editor(s)	
ISBN	
Name and location of publisher	
Number of pages of book	
Price	

Book Review Author Information

Name and degrees	
Affiliations (institutions, etc)	
Declaration of conflicts of interest	

Book Setting & Perspective

Type of Book	
Aim/Purpose (from preface/introduction)	
Intended audience	

Appraisal Documentation

Appraisal Items	Appraisal Comments (Strengths/Weaknesses)	Examples to Substantiate the Appraisal Comments	Praise or Constructive Suggestions for Improvement
Author(s) background & expertise			
Book Format/Organization Format/Organization			
Contents - Completeness - Accuracy - Current			
Readability/Style			

Technical Features - Table of contents - Chapter layout - Illustrations - Typography - Tables - Figures - References - Index - Appendices			
What is unique?			
Usefulness to the intended readership			
Were the goals of the book achieved?			
Comparison to competitors			
Comparison to previous editions			
Value of the book to the field of study			
Value for price			
Your overall recommendation(s)			